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ABSTRACT

An example of the influence of television on the reading interests of teenagers may be seen in the popularity of the book "Eric," the true story of a boy's four-and-a-half-year battle with leukemia, which began just two days before he entered college. Although the television adaptation was inaccurate in many details concerning Eric's life, teenagers were moved to learn more by reading about this teenager who struggled not only for life but for adolescent freedom, with style, humor, and class. Thus, they bought the paperback edition of the book in great quantity, read it, and wrote the author many letters describing their responses to the book. Television, by stirring imaginations and emotions and by awakening curiosity, can pull reluctant readers out of apathy and can become a stimulus to more and better reading. (JM)

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Teenagers, Media, Taste!

Doris Lund

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No one is more surprised than I to discover that I have written a book that is enormously popular with teenagers -- a book called ERIC, which is a true story of my son's four-and-a-half year battle with leukemia. Eric often said during those years that he wanted to write the true story of what was happening. And I think his book would have been better than mine. There was no way, though, that I could write his story. But as I watched him fight for life with every bit of strength and will and intelligence that he had, I realized that I was already writing my own story about his struggle -- in my head -- which, of course, is where all writing begins. I kept no notes at the time. I have a good memory. And besides, there was no way I was ever going to forget what I was watching.

Actually I got pulled into writing Eric's story long before I was ready. I am a graduate of Swarthmore College and a few weeks after he died on February 22, 1972, I happened to be writing a note to the alumnae secretary of my class who writes up the class notes for the college bulletin. She had recently lost a husband to cancer. He, too, put up an extraordinary fight. I sent her my condolences, told her about Eric, and said, "I wonder if you feel, as I do, that in spite of everything, there is somehow a great victory here? A victory of spirit?" Well she passed along my letter to the Alumnae Bulletin editor who then asked me to write a story for the magazine about Eric. I declined. She called me long distance, talked half an hour, and said, "I want you to reconsider because you have something here that must be shared." I went upstairs and began. The Bulletin appeared a few months later with my story entitled "Walk in the World for Me." It was immediately bought by Good Housekeeping. And that story was ~~immediately~~ soon

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picked up for condensation by the Reader's Digest. Before I Knew it I was sitting at a lunch table with my astonished agent (who'd had nothing to do with anything of this,) a friend of mine who is my present editor at Lippincott, and Lippincott's editor-in-chief. In a matter of hours we had a contract. Before this, I had written seven books for children -- picture books, some in verse, some merely short, humorous stories -- but nothing longer than 48 pages. Now I had to produce at least 80,000 words on a very serious subject -- one which many adults, even today, have a very hard time dealing with. The articles about Eric had generated a lot of enthusiasm. But I was still quite frightened when I stopped to wonder if there might be a real audience out there willing to read my book. I thought it might sell, oh maybe 10,000 copies if we were lucky. The fact that hard cover sales that first year were closer to 50,000, that the paperback has sold a million, twenty-five thousand and is now being reprinted, that there are 5 or 6 book club editions, and 15 editions in foreign countries -- including Finland and Israel -- is still very hard for me to grasp. I only knew, at the beginning, that I wanted to tell it true -- as Eric wanted to tell it true. Exactly like it was, nothing spared. This would not be another "Love Story" with an easy, pretty death. Much of my book would, of necessity, be ugly, bloody, hard to take. Perhaps excrutiatingly painful.

I had faith that the beauty and strength of Eric's courage would come through. He looked death right in the eye. He gave support and love to the many others who were dying around him. Above all, his love for all of us in his family was so deep that he tried to prepare us and help us survive what was going to happen, when he saw that he'd lost the game. Dr. Monroe Dowling, Eric's doctor at Memorial, who'd lived through years of losing patients, told me,

"Eric got me ready. He knew I wasn't facing the fact that I was losing him for his survival meant so much to me. But he made me talk about it and look at it." Now this is very strong stuff. So you see I thought the book might reach just a few who were able to look.

The biggest reward, of all the many, many rewards I've had from writing ERIC is my discovery that teenagers can take it. They are stronger than many grownups. Lots and lots of them are stronger than any of us could have guessed. They are responsive to real bravery. They are able to cry -- and they accept their own tears, instead of suppressing them. They read on to the very last page. They hang in there just as Eric hung in there. Hooray for them!

I am also thrilled that a good many of them have translated their emotion into a deeper appreciation of living from here on out, into wanting to help the world in some important way. Some of them write me that they have even changed their life goals and decided on different professions -- nursing, medicine, teaching, working with children. They look forward to being able to give blood on their eighteenth birthdays. They ask what else they can do? They remember to run, look at the sky, love the day they have <u>right now</u>.

I've had stacks and stacks of mail from people all over the world but three-quarters of the letters have come from teenagers. ERIC bridged the generation gap. A few years ago we were all worried because young people were dropping out, turning away from our society and its ills. I'm delighted to be able to report that my mail tells me that so many of them are looking for ways to be connected -- to get <u>in</u> to real life.

My debt to the TV version of ERIC is very great -- and I disliked the show intensely. If that statement startles you, it is

meant to.

It is well-known that few writers have any control over what happens to their work once it passes into the hands of TV or movie producers. If you get to be a very big writer, you can sometimes demand that you be included in the process of translation from one medium to another. You go to Hollywood as a consultant or maybe you even try to write the screen version yourself. Soon after that you make an appointment with your doctor for some alarming symptoms. You have ulcers, high blood pressure, or not-so-simple nervous tension. Nevertheless, I had such a charming letter from the producer who wanted to buy TV and movie rights to ERIC, assuring me that his deepest desire was to bring my son's story to the screen in all its original honesty and beauty, that I relaxed. He also promised to pay my expenses to Hollywood, and $100 a day plus further expenses, while I offered my ~~ERX~~ services as consultant to make sure that what transpired was faithful, in intent and result, to the original. A letter is one thing. What appears in your final contract is usually quite different.

During that winter I was out of action for a month with some surgery of my own. I called my agent once or twice to ask, "What's happening?" He assured me the TV scriptwriters were hard at work and excited and doing wonderful things. He hadn't seen anything, but he was sure we would have something to look at shortly. As it turned out a large package, labeled FINAL SCRIPT, arrived on my doorstep in Spring. I opened it quickly, read it all -- and began to shake with rage and horror. The TV show of ERIC opens with the statement "This is a true story ..." We then pan in to a shot of a young man running on a rocky beach somewhere along Puget Sound and it is soon apparent that this young man -- Eric -- is a soccer player for the University of Washington. We are less than two minutes into the

script -- and we've already told a major lie. Eric was, in actual fact, the soccer captain of the University of Connecticut. He was named to All New England All-Stars, given the Most Improved Player Award, and would surely have made All-American, in the opinion of sportwriters, if he had lived to do so. He contracted leukemia two days before he entered college. He never played a game without being full of anti-leukemic drugs. And as he once told an audience of 600 nurses who'd come to attend a Symposium on Patient Care at Memorial Hospital, "It isn't always easy to do business with my soccer coach and the doctors here but we work it out. If they want to hit me with a hard drug Tuesday, I say can you hold off till Thursday -- I've got a game Wednesday." Sometimes the doctors had to say, "It can't wait," and then he played anyway as best he could.

When he became very ill, and was hospitalized, busloads of blood donors came from the University -- a seven hour round trip -- to give for Eric. When he died, he was awarded the ~~University's~~ college's highest Honor, the medal given for Distinguished Service to the University of Connecticut. All of these honors, truly won, were casually wiped out with one stroke of a writer's pen putting Eric over 3,000 miles away from the scene of his real action. Why? If ~~they~~ lie they had to, then why not pretend ~~claim~~ Puget Sound was Long Island Sound? Fictitious geography is easier to swallow -- and often a practical necessity -- than fictitious story.

There were other indignities and falsehoods. The hospital looked like a Holiday Inn. One person died, but everybody else looked robust and in the pink of health. My husband was turned from writer into truck driver for a lumber yard -- a fact which amused him very much. Eric played his greatest Soccer game in the film, about two days before he died -- absolute bunk. Hollywood hokum. Eric was hospitalized for 6 weeks before he died, lost 50 pounds, and had trouble getting out of bed.

When I finished reading the script I called my agent and said I'd like to give the money back and stop the TV show. He told me they'd already started shooting in Seattle. "Take the money and do something good with it," he said.

When Hallmark Cards, the sponsors who'd bought the script for a Hall of Fame 2-hour TV special, found out how I felt about the TV story, they were naturally very concerned. They arranged for a private screening for my husband and myself. We went to New York. Remember, that we've only read the script before. Now we were looking at the actual filmed version on a TV screen.

It was a very strange experience. There was still a ~~very~~ strong undercurrent ~~xx~~ of resentment at the inaccuracies. But I also began to realize that this was a different story. I feel absolutely sure that it would have been much better, stronger, if the scriptwriters had been more true to the facts. But there still was enough there so that by the end of the film the boy's struggle to live, and his final defeat, were both deeply felt. I think this was most important. My husband and I both wept at the end -- but not for Eric, really. It was more as if we'd seen something which moved us somewhat, and which reminded us faintly of our son's story.

I did make a very strong complaint about several things. I wanted Eric's University to be mentioned by name. I wanted credit given to the more than 300 blood donors who made that long trip into New York to support a fellow student. There was not one single sack of blood shown in the film! Yet Eric was given an extra year of life from all those transfusions. There are still people in great need of blood and I was prepared to fight for some truth in presenting this part of the story. Hallmark was very gracious and cooperative. They

persuaded Dr. Joseph Burchenal, one of Eric's doctors and one of the

world's leading authorities on leukemia, to do a filmed postcript to the show. He set the record and the facts straight. I was very glad about that.

The following week, right after the TV showing of ERIC, the Dell paperback edition of the book appeared on the New York Times best seller list. Soon it was on many other best seller lists around the country. There was no doubt that the TV drama had been enormously helpful in selling the paperback -- and selling it, for the first time in great quantities, to teenagers. There are not many kids, after all, who can shell out $7.95 for a hard cover -- but now the story of ERIC was within their price range. And they'd been definitely turned on to want to know more about Eric from watching the show. I should stop here to point out that TV, by itself, can not sell a book. My publisher, Dell, did a marvelous job of blanketing the country with ERIC. The cover was beautiful. Then, once the kids started reading it, ERIC caught on. They began passing it around.

But it's this "wanting to know more",which TV triggered,which is important for all of us -- writers and educators -- to remember.

A further interesting question is why did the kids respond in such great numbers to ERIC? Many of the letters I've gotten from teenagers reveal great emotion -- and very little knowledge of spelling or grammar. It's obvious that a lot of them don't read much. And a lot of them don't like their English courses. Some of them come right out and say, "I never read a whole book before --" or "I don't like to read but this time I couldn't stop." A few of the more perceptive and better written letters told me that they thought the book was a lot better than the TV show. But many of the kids didn't see much difference. They loved them both. They even lumped them together, saying, "I cried all the way through the show and the book -- Eric was the greatest!" All of this brings us back to what was it that reached them?

In Eric, the teenagers can identify with a hero-athlete fighting a terrific fight against dreadful odds. He is also fighting the great adolescent battle for freedom. Freedom from his family, especially Mom. Freedom to live his own life, even if he is dying. We all know that kids watch a lot of violent shows -- they haven't much choice. Here was a chance to watch a young guy like themselves, a seventeen-year-old boy, fight the good fight against the baddest guy of all -- Death. It was for real. He didn't win. But he went down with style and humor and class. They liked that. The world is short of true heroes. Teenagers need them, we all need them. Television oversimplified and somewhat distorted -- by cleaning up -- the terrible agony of Eric's battle. Still, the message somehow came through and reached the kids.

I got a new message, too. This is a very powerful medium. I should like to fight for more honesty in what is presented on TV. And of course I did succeed in getting the Dr. Burchenal postscript added to the show. But I don't want to fight against the whole medium itself. I want to learn how to use it. For the first time, I'm considering trying to write an original story for sale to TV -- if possible. And so the TV adaptation of ERIC has been a very educational experience for me -- as well as the teenagers.

We will always have non-readers in our homes and classrooms. And many of us have been alarmed that TV might greatly increase their numbers. But my new thought is just the opposite. With TV's help, we may pull more of our reluctant readers out of apathy. At its best, TV stirs imaginations and emotions, wakens curiousity. When the tube turns people on this way, then it becomes the stimulus and the springboard to more and better reading. Thank you.